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ABSTRACT

Although the federal government's involvement in learning disabilities through task forces, legislation, and funding has been evident only since the 1960s and 1970s, the roots of learning disabilities can be traced back to the early 1800s. Learning disabilities are one of the newest categories officially recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, but the origins of the concept are long-standing. This paper summarizes a report that investigates the history of learning disabilities and divides this history into five periods: European Foundation Period (1800 to 1920); U.S. Foundation Period (1920 to 1960); Emergent Period (1960 to 1975); Solidification Period (1975 to 1985); and Turbulent Period (1985 to 2000). It argues that during the most recent period, circumstances have solidified the field while several issues have also threatened to tear the field apart. It points out that from 1976-77 to 1998-99, the number of students identified as having a learning disability has doubled to more than 2.8 million, representing just over half of all students with disabilities. Controversies over identification and inclusion are discussed. The paper also discusses research advances that have resulted in breakthroughs in knowledge about how children learn to read and what constitutes effective reading programs. (CR)

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LEARNING DISABILITIES: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Although the federal government's involvement in learning disabilities through task forces, legislation, and funding has been evident only since the 1960s and 1970s, we can trace the roots of learning disabilities back to the early 1800s. Learning disabilities are one of the newest categories officially recognized by the U. S. Department of Education, but the origins of the concept are long-standing.

Findings

This paper summarizes the history of learning disabilities and divides this history into five periods: European Foundation Period (1800 to 1920); U. S. Foundation Period (1920 to 1960); Emergent Period (1960 to 1975); Solidification Period (1975 to 1985); and Turbulent Period (1985 to 2000).

European Foundation Period – (1800 to 1920)

During this period, two main lines of work were related to learning disabilities. Several groundbreaking discoveries in the field of neurology occurred, and significant seminal articles and books on reading disabilities were published. In particular, Franz Joseph Gall explored the relationship between brain injury and mental impairment through observations of brain-injured soldiers. Others contributed to localizing the areas of the brain associated with speech and language.

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Adolph Kussmaul identified the concepts of "word/text blindness," which originated birth to the idea of specific reading disability. John Hinshelwood and W. Pringle Morgan highlighted the heritability of reading disability, and Hinshelwood identified the angular gyrus as the site of reading processing.

U.S. Foundation Period (1920 to 1960)

By about the 1920s, clinicians and researchers in the United States began to take an interest in the work of the Europeans who had been studying brain-behavior relationships and children and adults with learning difficulties. The U.S. researchers focused their efforts on language and reading disabilities and on perceptual, perceptual-motor, and attention disabilities. Several key figures from medicine, psychology, and education built on and expanded the European work during this period: Orton, Fernald, Monroe, and Kirk.

Samuel Orton was particularly influential, introducing descriptions of and interventions for reading disabilities (RD). He also was one of the first to introduce multisensory training for children with reading problems, an approach made famous by the Orton-Gillingham method for teaching reading. Orton also highlighted the fact that many of the students he worked with scored at average or above on the Stanford-Binet IQ test, providing an empirical basis for earlier observations of this phenomenon.

Grace Fernald kept extensive records on the progress of her students. Marion Monroe developed diagnostic tests, used the results to guide instruction, and systematically tested her teaching methods on students and recorded her results. Monroe also introduced the discrepancy concept as a way of identifying students with reading disabilities. Samuel Kirk developed and refined an assessment approach for pinpointing specific learning disabilities in children, the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA).

Also during this period, key researchers, many of whom had emigrated from Europe to the United States, conducted research on the perceptual, perceptual-motor, and attention disabilities of adults with brain injuries. Key figures were Goldstein, Werner, Strauss, Lehtinen, Cruickshank, and Kephart. These researchers recommended a number of instructional accommodations and teaching strategies for students with LD, such as providing a distraction-free environment and placing a heavy emphasis on the remediation of perceptual disturbances.

Emergent Period (1960 to 1975)

From about 1960 to 1975, learning disability began its emergence as a formal category. It was during this period that 1) the term *learning disabilities* was introduced; 2) the federal government included learning disabilities on its agenda; 3) parents and professionals founded organizations for learning disabilities; and (4) educational programming for students with learning disabilities blossomed, with a particular focus on psychological processing and perceptual training.

Most authorities credit Samuel Kirk as the originator of the term *learning disabilities;* he used the term during an address to a group of parents of "perceptually handicapped" children in 1963. Professing his distaste for labels, Kirk proceeded to introduce the term that has become, by far, the most frequently used label in special education. Parents and advocates then used this term as a central theme in their efforts to organize and gain services for LD students. Major organizations that arose were the Division for Children with Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (presently LDA).

Definitions of learning disabilities have varied over the years, depending on the growth of knowledge and on the entity defining the term. In 1965, Barbara Bateman, a student of Kirk, reintroduced Monroe's discrepancy model for the identification of students with LD.

Federal involvement began in the early 1960s with cosponsorship of 2 task forces both of which ended focusing on definition—one composed primarily of medical professionals and one composed primarily of educators. In addition, in the late 1960s, the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) formed a committee to issue a report on learning disabilities and to write a definition of learning disabilities to be used as a basis for legislation. The 2 task forces and the committee each developed somewhat divergent definitions of LD.

The Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act, passed by Congress in 1969, supported service programs for students with LD. In 1970, Public Law 91-230 consolidated the Education of the Handicapped Act with other programs on the education of children with disabilities. This legislation included authority for the USOE to award discretionary grants for LD to support teacher education, research, and model service delivery. The USOE also established strategies for educational models and technical assistance, the Child Service Demonstration Projects, and the Leadership Training Institute in Learning Disabilities.

Samuel Kirk also worked to further refine the ITPA. Although the ITPA fell out of favor, it reinforced the idea that children with LD have intra-individual differences and underlined the concept of diagnostic-prescriptive teaching.

Also during this period, a variety of remedial techniques were devised to address what researchers and educators perceived as visual and visual-motor disabilities. However, these were generally found to be ineffective in addressing the academic problems of LD students.

Solidification Period (1975 to 1985)

The period from about 1975 to 1985 was relatively stable as the field moved toward consensus on the definition of learning disabilities and the methods of identifying students with learning disabilities. In 1975, Congress passed Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. With this law, learning disabilities finally achieved official status as a category eligible for funding for direct services. It was also a period of considerable applied research, much of it funded by the U.S. Office of Education, that resulted in empirically validated educational procedures for students with learning disabilities. By the early 1970s, the definition of learning disabilities formulated in 1968 by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) had become the most popular one among state departments of education, probably leading to the U.S. Office of Education's adoption of the NACHC definition for implementation of Public Law 94-142. The federal government still uses this definition, but other definitions have been adopted by parent and professional groups and proposed by researchers, as new knowledge about learning disabilities arises from continuing research. In 1977, the federal government issued regulations pertaining to the identification of students with learning disabilities that incorporated the idea of an ability-achievement discrepancy.

The disappointing results from remedial techniques to address visual and visual-motor disabilities caused researchers to turn their attention to developing educational methods for students with LD. A major impetus for this was the USOE's funding of five research institutes focused on a variety of LD issues:

- Columbia University on information processing difficulties
- University of Illinois at Chicago on social competence and attributions about success and failure
- University of Kansas on educational interventions for adolescents

- University of Minnesota on the decision-making process related to identification and on curriculum-based assessment
- University of Virginia on children with LD who also had attention problems and on providing strategies for direct use on academic tasks

The work of all these institutes has remained influential up until the present day in terms of theory and practice. In addition, Sigfried Engelmann, Wesley Becker, and their colleagues developed a number of intervention programs for language, reading, and mathematics, emphasizing the systematic teaching of language subskills and their integration into broader language competence. These interventions are often referred to as Direct Instruction, and several large-scale studies have found Direct Instruction to be highly effective.

Turbulent Period (1985 to 2000)

During the most recent period of LD history, circumstances have solidified the field even further. However, several issues have also threatened to tear the field apart. From 1976–77 to 1998–99, the number of students identified as LD doubled to more than 2.8 million, representing just over half of all students with disabilities. Although some have argued that there may be good reasons for this growth, most acknowledge that many children may be misdiagnosed as LD.

During this period, the issue of defining LD has been further solidified. The research institutes' continuing work has demonstrated that students with learning disabilities are capable of learning task-appropriate strategies that enable them to succeed in school. In addition, a confluence of research findings on phonological processing has led to great breakthroughs in knowledge about how children learn to read and what constitutes effective reading programs. Further, continuing studies have supported earlier conclusions that LD may be the result of neurological dysfunction and that heredity is implicated in many cases of LD.

Tension and discord in the field have arisen from a concern that identification procedures not only are flawed, but also are resulting in the misidentification of too many minority students as LD. Many researchers have begun to question the dependence on the discrepancy concept, suggesting the following: the studies leading to the discrepancy approach were flawed; the IQ scores of LD students with reading disabilities may be underestimated because of their reading disabilities; the discrepancy approach makes it very difficult to identify children early enough for preventive interventions; and researchers have been unable to discriminate between students with a discrepancy and students with low reading achievement who have no discrepancy. New alternatives to the discrepancy approach are being explored.

Another issue that has created discord in the field is the full inclusion movement. Parents of students with LD are fearful that their children are not receiving sufficient or appropriate services when they return to regular classrooms.

A stream of thought that has created a high level of discord within the field is called postmodernism. Many of the tenets of postmodernist thought about special education are in direct conflict with the tenets of modernism. For example, modernism holds that the current state of knowledge in special education, developed through the scientific method of inquiry, is promising and provides a solid foundation on which to build more knowledge and best practices. Postmodernism rejects this modern view of science, supporting a socially constructed view of knowledge in which logical inquiry is a social enterprise. Modernism holds that disability is a phenomenon consistent with the medical model of wellness and illness and that it can be treated, accommodated, or endured. Modernists believe that special education should use instruction to enhance the functioning, knowledge, skills, and socialization of individuals with disabilities. Postmodernism views disability as a social construction that is based on incorrect and immoral

assumptions about difference. The primary focus of postmodernism is on changing social constructions that limit individuals with disabilities. These two views are contending vigorously as the configuration and mission of special education continue to evolve.